

# Transparency

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## The Assumption of Transparency

In the field of optics, transparency is a physical property that expresses how light passes through a material with varying degrees of absorption. The opposite to transparency is opacity, which describes the degree to which a material (or context) resists the transmission of light (or information). The aim of this example is to align some of the properties of optical transparency with those of the transparency that occurs in the social sciences. The text explores the degree to which a particular context may resist the transmission of infor-

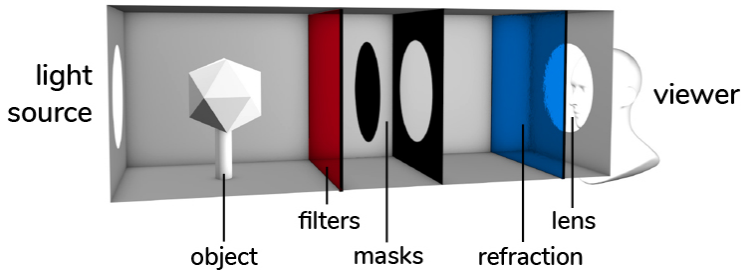
**Transparency** is a term that refers to openness, communication, and accountability, and is used as a means to establish trust in democratic systems, public persons, and institutions.

mation in the many areas of our lives where we expect the institutions with which we engage (e.g., governance, healthcare, economy) to communicate transparently and openly with us, in order to permit us to hold them to account.

While we might understand why transparency is considered important for accountability, further examination suggests that full transparency is complex and nuanced, and as such may not fulfil the functions society expects or gains from it.

The following diorama images help illustrate the complexity of transparency using optics. We see objects when light waves bounce off their surfaces and travel toward our eyes. This is called *reflection*. When light waves pass through a transparent (or partially transparent) substance, this is called *refraction*, which changes the direction of the path the light waves were taking. This occurs with such devices as prisms and lenses. Refraction can cause objects to look different and/or appear to be in a different place than they actually are.

In the diorama, the three-dimensional object at left represents “facts.” It is situated within a constructed environment that includes a series of filters, masks, and lenses, each of which affect the way that the viewer (at right) perceives the object (or facts). These optical devices parallel the ways in which institutional information and communication of that information may appear to be transparent, but are in fact subject to multiple layers that alter the reality of the information.

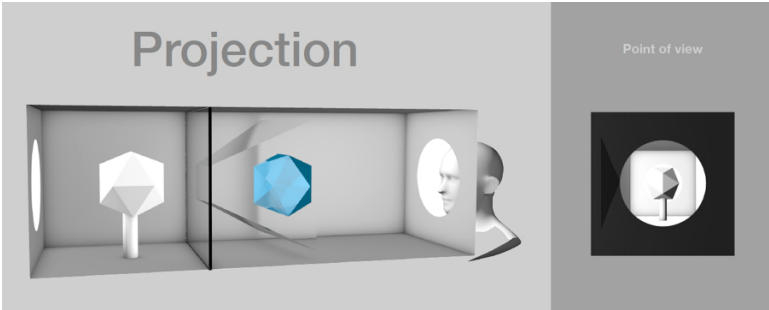


**Figure 1:** The Assumption of Transparency. The viewer perceives the images as a composite; each of the transparent filers or masks tempers how the facts are perceived. From left to right: the many faceted Object represents “facts,” with certain areas highlighted as light hits the surfaces; Filters can transmit some wavelengths of light and block others (e.g., infrared), make all wavelengths less intense (e.g., neutral density), or block some parts of the spectrum that cause reflection and create better visibility (e.g., polarizing); Masks are a means of closing or opening the field of view, and can draw focus on an important element in the frame; Refraction takes place when light enters a transparent substance and bends the path of transmission, causing objects to look different when viewed; Lenses offer various properties that can affect how the viewer sees the object.

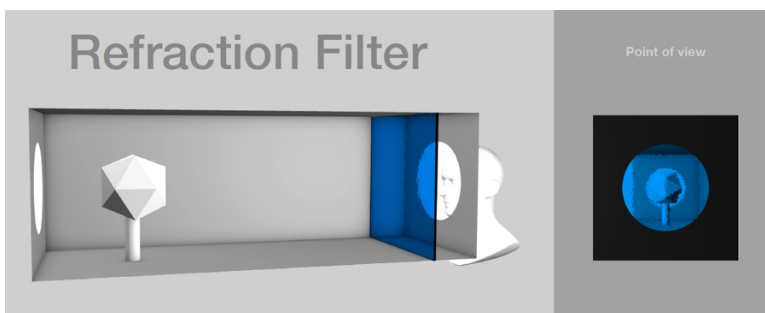
In the same way the diorama shows us that optical transparency is nuanced, so is political transparency equally complex. Political transparency can take three forms: *informational transparency* (public statements and disclosure of information); *participatory transparency* (being able to take part in decision making through fair representation); and *accountability transparency* (holding officials responsible when laws are violated). Perversely, politicians often use the very concept of transparency to manipulate the presentation of information.

Journalists can also adapt their rhetoric to defend their own investigative practices. For example, political media coverage often focuses more on the personal lives of politicians rather than their policies.

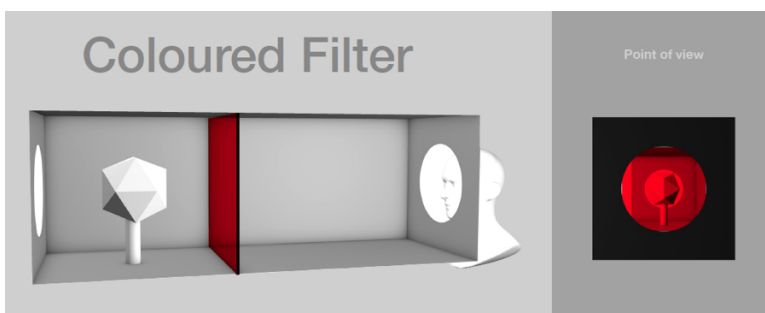
Returning to the diorama, we can see how transparency—often understood as synonymous with openness and disclosure—can be manipulated. Relied on as a principle for enabling the public to gain information about the operations and structures of a given entity, it can in fact both help and hinder political relationships. While some political information may be transmitted without alteration, other communications may be filtered, distorted, refocused, or obscured through the use of the rhetorical equivalents of projection, refraction, reflection, and masking.



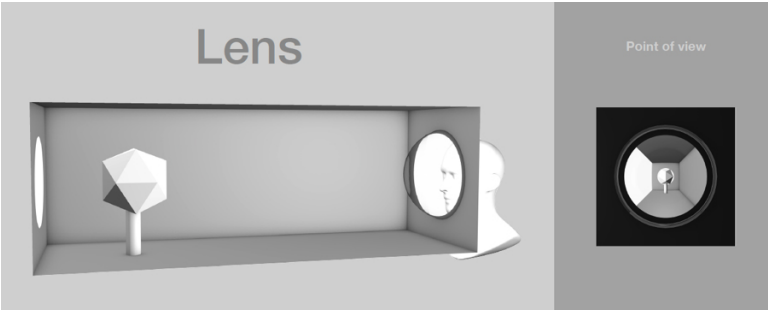
**Figure 2:** Projection. The image the viewer sees in this example is a 3D projection. It is not the true image of the facts, but is instead a projected simulation.



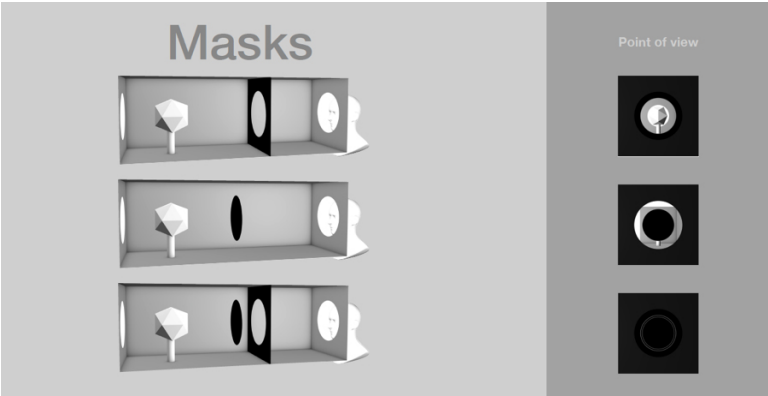
**Figure 3:** Refraction Filter. A refraction filter or obscure glass allows a limited amount of information to pass through it. The viewer is able to see the object but the image is distorted and unclear. There are methods for seeing through it using deblurring techniques. Those with access to these techniques are able to gain a greater level of transparency.



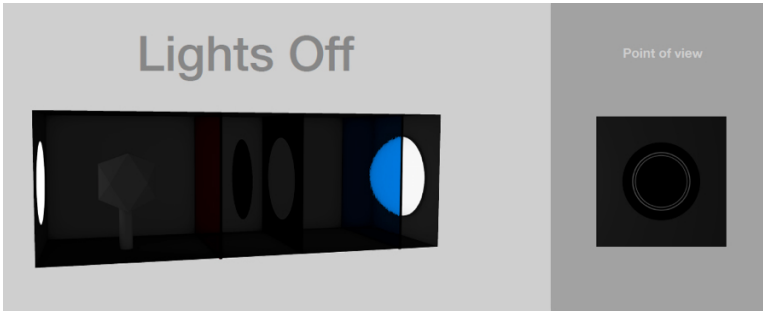
**Figure 4:** Coloured Filter. Coloured filters allow the viewer to see the object tempered with a particular tint. This can bias the way the viewer perceives and feels about the object. Colour psychology may vary greatly across different cultures. Filtering occurs when there is a proliferation of materials available, both in terms of what media decide to cover and what individuals decide to watch.



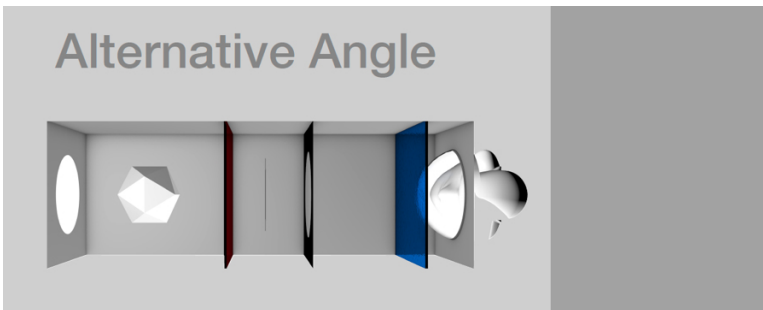
**Figure 5:** Lens. The lens through which we view a fact can distort how we see it. A wide-angle lens expands space, making objects look farther apart and more distant than normal. This allows greater opportunity to focus on specific elements within a scene. A lens can draw focus to or defocus a specific area.



**Figure 6:** Masks. Masks lead the viewer to focus on particular designated areas of the facts. They may act as a veil to obscure specific areas. The example above shows how two masks, used individually, can allow the viewer to see certain aspects of the facts, whereas when used together, they mask the facts completely.



**Figure 7:** Lights Off. Transparency requires light. The facts are in place and viewable when those responsible for the facts permit the light to be switched on.



**Figure 8:** Alternative Angle. This view offers an alternative perspective to that of the viewer, representing another angle on the facts. In this view, the filters have no effect on the facts. The position of the viewer has an impact on how the facts are received.

### Discussion Questions

- How can transparency be understood as an overvalued concept?
- What methods used by politicians and mass media might be noted as forms of projection, filtering, and masking?

- Provide examples of ways in which media and communications can be used to divert audience attention, supplementing politicians with new realities that crowd out and eventually displace other political realities and political issues.

### *Exercise*

Create your own version of the diorama to expand your understanding of transparency in other areas of social science. You can construct it in different physical spaces, such as a hallway or a cardboard box, or you can sketch it out on paper or using graphic design software. Consider alternative views and perspectives, and the impact they have on transparency.

### *Additional Resources*

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[International colour symbolism diagram](#)

[What are the different types of optical filters?](#)

[Optical filters explained](#)

[How different lenses form images by refracting light](#)

[Transparency International](#): a global organisation against corruption